

Indiana Wildlife Photography

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

In order to express the admiration I have for the fauna of the world in a format other than an essay, I have created six wildlife photographs. The objective of these photographs is to represent as closely as possible animals' beauty, behavior, and relationship with their environment, while adhering to compositional elements that create quality photographs. This compilation represents my semester long project in wildlife photography. It details what equipment was used, how photographs were taken, why specific photographs were selected for print, and how photos were scanned, digitally enhanced, and printed. The disk enclosed contains digital images of the six photographs I chose to digitally enhance and print for my final product.

Acknowledgements

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Indiana Wildlife Photography

A picture is worth a thousand words. This idea is what I chose to express when I selected Indiana wildlife photography for my honors thesis. This topic was a way of combining two of my passions in life: zoology and photography. As a Zoology major at Ball State I have taken numerous courses that have furthered my appreciation for the animal fauna of the Earth. Unfortunately, by choosing a scientific field of study, I rarely get to express my artistic side. This project has allowed me to explore my creativity while at the same time show the world my appreciation for the diversity of life in a format no words could compare with.

Though my admiration for wildlife cannot be put into words, the process in which I created my photographs can. My endeavor in wildlife photography was a semester long adventure that consisted of four distinct parts. First I determined what film and equipment would best capture the wildlife I intended to photograph. Secondly I took the photographs in the field. Next, I developed the film and selected specific photographs to print. Finally, I scanned, digitally enhanced, and printed the photographs.

Film and Equipment

When deciding on what film and equipment to use, the first thing that came to my mind was money. Today photography is not cheap. A quality lens can cost hundreds of dollars. Since I do not possess that sort of money I decided to use what I already had. When I began this project I possessed a Vivitar 4000 35 mm SLR (Single Lens Reflex) camera. As the book I purchased as a guide exclaims this proved to be an advantage. "The 35mm SLR camera is the system of choice for the overwhelming majority of

professional and serious amateur wildlife photographers” (Toon 6). What makes this camera so advantageous is the large range of lenses and accessories that are available.

Other than my camera, I had one other accessory: a 300mm Tele-Macro lens. This lens was necessary in order for me to get close up shots of fauna in the distance since most have an innate fear of man. The macro capabilities also proved very helpful in photographing smaller subjects like insects as it enabled me to zoom in and focus on the animals while in close proximity. Despite this, however, the size of my lens still restricted me from taking many photographs. A 300mm is a relatively small telephoto lens, thus still requiring me to get close enough to the animals without startling them. A larger lens, with higher zoom capabilities, would have been preferable but unrealistic due to their cost.

The final component needed in order to take photographs was film. Selecting an appropriate film for the project was simple. Since the beauty of nature is seen in color, I thought it was best to choose a film that would yield the most color. For this reason I chose to use color slide film. I chose Fuji Sensia 200 speed color slide film. While the authors of my guide book recommended Fuji Sensia 100 as the best choice for sunny conditions (Toon 33), I chose to use a slightly faster speed of film. While faster speeds like 200 produce less color and are grainier, I found its benefit of less required light to be worth the switch to a lower speed.

In the Field

Once the film was purchased I was ready to take photographs. While I did some research into technique, I chose to take the advice of my guide book which states, “the best way to become a better wildlife photographer is by spending time in the field

exploring your own response to the natural world with your camera, rather than searching for magic formula on the printed page” (Toon 1). With this in mind, I set out into the field to learn how to become a wildlife photographer. Progressing from roll to roll and seeing my mistakes proved to be a true learning experience.

When I first set out into the field I discovered I had no clue what I was doing. At this point in the season only birds were present (as it was too cold for anything else). Birds, as I soon discovered, are difficult subjects to photograph. Born with an innate fear of man, whenever I got close enough to one it would fly away. Sometimes the more courageous birds would stay for a few seconds. When I began setting up my tripod, however, they quickly flew off. It was not long before I gave up on my tripod and chose to take on the hunting style of wildlife photography. Though this limited my range of shutter speeds and aperture sizes, thereby limiting the choice in depth of field, I decided the benefits out-weighed the costs.

After taking two rolls of film and developing them, I discovered my first problem: I was still too far away from my subjects. While I was sure at the time that the birds were close enough for a quality photo; I soon learned that I was sorely mistaken. When examining my photos, however, I noticed that the few photos in which they were close enough had a common characteristic. In each of these photographs I could see the animal’s eyes. Thus with my first problem came my first solution. I would not photograph an animal unless its eyes could be seen through my viewfinder. This rule proved very effective for the remaining five rolls of film.

Though I had discovered my problem early and formulated a solution, getting even closer to the birds proved difficult. In my attempt, I learned the art of patience.

Patience is the most valuable lesson a wildlife photographer can learn. Without it most of my pictures would never have been taken. Instead of hunting birds with my camera, I took on a more passive roll and let the birds come to me. Since I was no longer moving, the birds felt more comfortable with my presence and continued their daily activities. These activities often led them in eye viewing range so I could take my photograph.

After taking a few rolls of film, I could tell I was greatly improving. My pictures, however, still consisted mainly of birds. When undertaking this project I decided I would shoot a wide range of fauna. This is where I learned the second most valuable lesson a wildlife photographer can learn. I discovered the harsh reality that weather is entirely unpredictable. It was mid-March and the weather was still too cold for anything but birds and the occasional squirrel. On top of this was the fact that the days seemed to be perpetually cloudy, dulling the colors of nature. I had chosen a film that was best used on sunny days. For these reasons I had no choice but to put off taking photos until conditions improved. Weeks were passing and I was behind schedule. Though I was extremely nervous, patience again came to my rescue. Sure enough in April the weather finally improved and the rest of Indiana's wildlife came out, allowing me to continue my project.

Photographing subjects other than birds required a different strategy. While birds fly away from man, they are much easier to locate. This is what I discovered when I began searching for mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Of these three, mammals proved the hardest to find. When compared to birds the mammalian fear of man is far greater. Their fear is so immense that they avoid humans at all costs. Unfortunately for

me, they possess the ability to smell human scent from a distance. Because of this they often ran away before I saw them, therein leaving me with very few pictures.

Reptiles and amphibians (collectively herps), on the other hand, were much better subjects for photography. Though they were difficult to locate, with a bit of active searching they were readily found. This active searching was required as passively waiting for subjects proved ineffective. Once the animals were located, however, they held relatively still to shoot.

Of all the animals I encountered, invertebrates proved to be the best subjects. Invertebrates were abundant once spring came. More so, if I held relatively still these subjects ignored my presence, thus allowing me to take some quality photographs. In fact, the only trouble I had photographing invertebrates was actually being too close for my macro lens to focus on them. This, however, was easily solved by slowly leaning back so I could take my photograph.

Developing and Picture Selection

Once a roll of film was taken, the next step in the process was to develop it. Fuji Sensia 200 requires a developmental process known as E-6 processing. This is a relatively simple procedure involving seven different chemicals. These chemicals each have their own separate function and react in a stepwise fashion at 100 degrees Fahrenheit. After developing, the film was dried, cut into slides, placed into slide mounts, and organized in transparency pages. A total of seven rolls of film were developed.

Once all my film had been developed I was faced with the difficult decision of selecting which pictures I wanted to print. Indiana wildlife consists of a diverse group of

organisms. I chose six pictures embodying four different groups of organisms: birds, invertebrates, amphibians, and reptiles. Each of these six photographs best expresses that animal's beauty, behavior, and relationship to its environment. More so, each chosen picture utilizes various photographic compositional elements found in quality photographs.

Canada Goose: An organism and its environment, while separate, are also one. This is what I tried to capture in this photograph. I encountered this particular goose at Lake Summit in New Castle Indiana. The day was sunny and the water was a brilliant blue. I thought this blue made a fantastic backdrop for the goose and showed wonderfully the aquatic nature of the waterfowl. More so, the ripples in the water give the image a distinct sharpness that beckoned to be printed.

Mallard Duck: I decided upon this picture because of its compositional elements. When taking this photograph my intent was to draw attention to the drake's vibrant green head. I believe this green, in contrast with the gray of the body, provides an excellent example of the true beauty of nature. In order to draw attention to the green, I utilized two photographic compositional elements. The first element is known as the rule of diagonals. Under this rule the subject's focal point is placed off center along one of the diagonals of the picture. This element helps bring attention to the focal point of the subject, which in this case was the duck's head. The second element I made use of is known as framing. This technique is where elements surrounding the subject are used to frame the object of focus. In this case the duck weed boxes in the head of the animal, therein drawing the viewer's attention to the green head.

Crayfish: When selecting photographs I wanted to find those that best represented the animal's behavior and relationship to the environment. I believe this picture is a wonderful example of both. One of a crayfish's most distinct features is its claws. From the angle the photo was taken, these claws look enormous compared to the rest of the body. Here I was attempting to show the crayfish's dangerous side, as they are known to be aggressive when provoked. In this picture I was also trying to show how the animal is camouflaged in its environment. The near mono-tonality of this photograph shows this well.

Garter Snake: I decided to print this photograph because of its simplistic nature. When this picture is broken down geometrically it is merely a diagonal line running through most of the photograph. This geometry best shows a snake's external anatomy. Snakes are seemingly simple animals, possessing no legs or distinct outer features. Nevertheless, people make snakes out to be dangerous creatures of complexity. With this view, it is no wonder people fear them. It was my hope in this photograph to express the snake as simplistic as possible, so viewers could get beyond their fears and see its beauty.

Green Frog: I chose this photograph because of its use of color. I believe this picture shows one of my favorite qualities of nature: that beauty can be found even in the dreariest of scenes. I found this frog near a muddy stream with little aesthetic value. But even in that desolate scene there was a spark of splendor provided by the frogs dazzling green color. This picture shows this strong contrast between the dull and vibrant and is, therefore, a perfect example that beauty is in all places.

Dragonfly: My reasons for selecting this photograph are threefold. First, it is my opinion that invertebrates are often overlooked by the public. In my project, I wanted to

show that invertebrates, like all animals, are beautiful. I believe this picture represents this with the vibrant blues and greens of the dragonfly. Secondly, I believe this photograph displays great composition using both framing and a focal point that follows the rule of thirds. The rule of thirds, like the diagonal rule, brings attention to the focal point of the subject by displacing it from the center. If the picture was subdivided into thirds both horizontally and vertically, the law of thirds places the subject at one of the intersections of the subdivisions.

Finally I believe the dragonfly photograph does a wonderful job expressing the animal's behavior. The focal point of this picture is the dragonfly's eyes. Because of this, attention is immediately drawn to them. The size of the eyes shows the dragonfly's ever-alert behavior. More so, this photograph captures a specific behavior of the insect: mate defense. This photograph depicts a male grasping onto a female who is depositing eggs in the back ground. Male dragonflies do this to ensure that no other males mate with the female, thus ensuring it is their sperm that fertilizes the eggs.

Scanning, and Digital Enhancement

Once my pictures were selected, the next step was scanning my photos. This was done using a Nikon LS 2000 digital film scanner provided by the Ball State Department of Industry and Technology. When the pictures were scanned they were simultaneously cropped to an 8 X 10 size. These pictures were cropped in accordance to rule of diagonals and law of thirds allowing them to retain, and sometimes improve, their photographic composition.

After scanning, photographs were digitally enhanced using two computer programs. The first was Microsoft Picture it Express 9. This program allowed me to do

quick touch editing that helped bring out the colors that were lost when the slides were initially scanned. The second program used was Adobe Photoshop 7. This program was needed to fix portions of photos that did not scan correctly. The photograph of the green frog, for example, had many blobs of extreme highlights that were not present on the color slide itself. Once photos were enhanced digitally they were printed using a color photo printer.

Conclusion

My attempt to create art, while simultaneously reflect my passion for wildlife, has led me down a path of self-education. From day one I discovered that it would be no easy task to blend the two. As time progressed, however, I began to learn how to be a wildlife photographer. With every roll my photographs increased in quality. By the end of my semester long project, I believe that I successfully accomplished my task of expressing my passion for animals in photographs. It is my hope that each photograph I have produced is worth more than a thousand words.

Source

Toon, Ann, and Steve Toon. Wildlife Photography Workshops.

East Sussex: Guild of Master Craftsman Publications Ltd., 2003.